



Urban

Wednesday, April 11, 2012

What Happened To Quality Radio?

Veteran Urban programmer-turned talent coach, Sam Weaver, has some distinct thoughts on how radio has evolved over the past 20 years, specifically since the Telecom Act of 1996. While it was presumed that the business side of broadcast radio would distinctly be impacted, he says, the creative side has actually been changed just as significantly, if not more so. Here are his thoughts on "What Happened To Quality Radio?"

Today, commercial radio is a corporate body with purpose and intentional activities. They include: buying, selling, promising, and endorsing, as well as justifying its existence and attempting to influence legislation. Like other industries that have experienced changes due to government deregulation, we often find that broadcast management objectives differ greatly from those of the workers.

In its current state, corporate radio does not appear to rely enough on the expertise of programming. Instead, some policies and regulatory situations have been created contrary to the creative process. In layman's terms, the men and women in management are putting the cart (the end result) before the horse (the process to achieve the end result).

Radio attempts to provide a product that sales can market to advertisers, while programmers are told to get the most listeners they can in their specific target demo. But the programming department is at the mercy of corporate leaders who, at times, have little or no experience in the creative process. (Among the few exceptions are CBS Radio President and Chief Executive Dan Mason, Clear Channel CEO Bob Pittman, and the recently resigned Radio Division President of Radio One, Barry Mayo.)

Consumers (listeners) end up with a watered down product because there is no balance between the sales and programming departments. Dictates from corporate seem to be solely monetarily motivated with minimum thought towards creative excellence.

We have become a society of consensus and polling, where many are afraid to push the boundaries of traditional radio. The few innovative ideas and concepts seem to be for creating podcasts, online radio, and all things digital. Mega-corporations are playing it safe with radio. It reminds me of a football team trying to not lose (with its defense) instead of playing to win (with the offense). Apparently, the priorities are to stay on the air, spend as little as possible, and provide a space for advertisers. There is a direct correlation between this minimal thought process and the lack of quality programming on the airwaves.

To understand why this is, we have to look back at the time when all things in radio as we knew it changed. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was the first significant change in FCC law in more than 60 years. The new law sought to open competition in the communications market. Not surprisingly, the law was looked upon favorably by media corporations. It led to a wave of mergers that resulted in decreased competition. Instead of many groups

providing media services, these mergers brought the number of participants down to only a handful of radio companies. This has also resulted in fewer announcers, lower wages, and less creativity on air.

And now, the industry wants even more deregulation. The NAB has filed comments with the FCC that call for even more relaxed rules. According to the NAB, "The existing local radio ownership rules are not necessary to promote the commission's goals of competition, diversity or localism." The fact that NAB is lobbying for this pretty much speaks to the influence of mega media corporations.

Recently Mt. Wilson Broadcast owner Saul Levine [sent a protest letter to the NAB threatening to cancel \[http://www.radio-info.com/news/nab-member-saul-levine-threatens-to-resign\]](http://www.radio-info.com/news/nab-member-saul-levine-threatens-to-resign) his membership. He also indicated the NAB suggestion came without surveying its members. If the FCC follows through on the NAB request, it will help to drive out even more independent owners and further advance the decline of quality radio. Is this what the industry really wants? I don't think so.

I believe that radio is resilient. It can overcome its own missteps. The major radio corporations are shining examples of capitalism. They have survived the recession, adjusted to Wall Street changes, and realigned their businesses model. But where is the creative juggernaut to help traditional radio propel itself forward? Everything appears more investor oriented than listener driven. This needs to change.

Realistically, how much input do local programmers have anymore? The corporation is the king which dictates such decisions as the widespread use of syndicated programming and voice-tracking on stations. In many instances, the stations impacted already had saleable ratings. And if the changes result in worse ratings, the only savings has been in salary, with no chance of an increase in revenue.

National programming minds need to get rid of the "one answer fits all mentality"; some problems and solutions are local and some are universal. There is a definite disconnect between mega corporation radio and quality programming; the cookie cutter broadcast approach is only good to keep costs down. It's not going to help radio remain relevant to listeners in the future.

The corporate "push-down" has also impacted morale at stations. How often have you heard people say, "Radio isn't fun anymore." Radio used to be an amazing career—the kind you would do even if you didn't get paid. The announcers would hang out because the atmosphere had more of a campus feel. These types of settings were perfect for jocks to express ideas that wound up on the air and, more importantly, put money on the books. There was a bond among co-workers, resulting in a passionate feeling about their workplace.

Currently you have to look to technology and social media industries to find that nurturing environment radio once had. Some examples include: Apple, which has flex work hours; Microsoft, which provides free alternative therapies such as reflexology, massage, etc; and Google, which offers employees free breakfast, lunch, dinner, on site massages, on site fitness centers, flexible hours, as well as napping areas. These companies are creative factories where innovation translates into profit and where workers are treated as resources, not widgets.

So what can we do in radio to bring back the creativity and fun once again? Companies (even those with stations in various cities and formats) could regularly hold brainstorming sessions locally and nationally. In either case, all the jocks in a cluster should be included without any other departments involved. Appoint one PD or jock to facilitate. These sessions could be held once a month with the focus on fun and sharing ideas. These kinds of brainstorming sessions should be different and separate than jock meetings, which tend to turn into dictates, complaining, and what not to do.

I love radio, and therefore, I am still hopeful that radio corporations will push for new ways to include creative input. These companies are not the evil empire, it's just that along the way, a lot of what made radio work has been pushed aside. It should also be noted there are some companies making tremendous strides with social media, digital expansion and new technologies. However, for music stations, it's still about the music and the jocks making the listening journey entertaining for the consumer.



NAB member Saul Levine threatens to resign

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Comments

Anonymous

Commented April 11, 2012 at 1:52PM:

You hit it on the nail. Listen to how bad New York City Urban ACs sound these days. You got both Kiss and WBLS trying to sound very Birmingham,Alabama/Memphis,TN with their music . Remember when you could hear progressive R&B on those stations? Neither station is in the Top 5. Go figure.

Teddy Robinson

Commented April 11, 2012 at 3:06PM:

I'm beginning to feel Commercial Terrestrial Radio that I grew up with, that I was attracted to pursue as a career is dead as we once knew it. What deregulation has allowed is shameful. To have the industry primarily run by only a handful of mega companies is continually killing off creativity, local feel, personality radio and more. Check every market in the nation and you will be hard pressed to find an overnight Live DJ/Personality. On commercial terrestrial radio. Every Station these days have a board operator running the "continuous music, popping in the promos and commercials. There really is very little "Personality Radio" anymore. I was inspired my Detroit's "Electrifying Mojo" while lying in my dorm room in college. I dug Frankie Crocker, learned from Kiss 108's Sonny Joe White. Elroy Smith helped groom me by our aircheck sessions when I was just breaking in during the 80s. Today do PDs even have to conduct aircheck sessions? The on air staffs are mostly voice tracked, or is limited to giving limited seconds between songs or commercials. I have been doing my- "old school personality" style of Radio on Public Radio, and haven't done commercial radio since 1988, but what I hear sounds like a downward spiral to me. I'm sure many who have worked long in commercial terrestrial radio are turning towards Public radio and other outlets such as Internet radio for that creative expression. Something hard to find on Commercial Radio today. Would I love for terrestrial commercial radio to survive and thrive? YES! But I don't see it happening with Clear Channel, and a few others stunting the "creative" process with "voice-tracking, and all the streamlining of talent. As for Sam's last comment about "it's still about the music and the jocks making the listening journey entertaining for the consumer. " That's what the JOCKS of yesterday used to do, I don't know if they have the same opportunity on air today.

Brian Carter

Commented April 14, 2012 at 1:40PM:

A M E N!

Dj Jimmy Jam

Commented April 14, 2012 at 8:55PM:

Hello Mr Weaver. great job on the article. currently I have a radio show on 90.1 wnaa(nc a&t). D'Cherie Lofton(PD). I'm 46 yrs old. I do an Old School Mix Show. I'm asked or told all the time I should try to get on a commercial station. Well yesterday while on the air. I made the statement that I'm a product of the 70's & 80's, and how as a child i would sit in front of the speaker for hours. Of course the music was good, but i couldn't wait to hear the "personality" that was on. Therefore my style is a little different from the "Robotic" style of today. And i don't mean that in a bitter or negative way. Long story short would I take a job on a commercial station. Of course, but i must admit "I LOVE BEING ME" and I love 90.1 for allowing me to be "A RADIO PERSONALITY" that has made people laugh, cry & inform/encourage the listeners to get involved and support the community. Thanks again, take care and I'll post the article link on my facebook page.

Anonymous

Commented April 20, 2012 at 5:38PM:

WELL written and thought out points... If current PD/OMs don't show PASSION for their respective entities, we could very well see Urban and UrbAC outlets fall into the "trap" of OVER researched (generic) programming that

ALMOST put an end to our CHR/HotAC counterparts... Mr. Weaver, I'm certain more dialogue on THIS level is needed now MORE than ever for Black Radio's forward progress... We sadly seem to be in a Wall Street vs.MainStreet phase right now.

Dale Sanders

Commented April 22, 2012 at 11:28AM:

Finally, someone has the guts to say what is exactly going on in the industry. The bottom line is that ALL stations have access to the same music. It's the localization, personality, and promotions that will make radio successful again. Get creative and lose the corporate dictates.

Greg Mc Clure

Commented May 10, 2012 at 4:54PM:

Great review of How It Got To Be This Way. All formats have suffered. Many are a stale imitation of the vibe they once radiated. Voice-tracked, corporate playlist stations have missed whole generations of potential "new" listeners. Will the bean-counters see the light? Or to put it another way...when will hell freeze over?

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